



Making paper for a card for Mom.

PAUL SUTHERLAND is chief investment officer of the FIM Group and founder of the Utopia Foundation, which sends volunteers around the globe through utopiavolunteers.org.

I'm sick of giving Christmas gifts to my spoiled kids. What do I do?

I'm sick of giving Christmas gifts. I give a lot in my life—and I'm on a strict budget—but my kids still expect me to shell out for them. I don't want to spoil Christmas. But I think I've spoiled my kids and I'm tired of paying for it. What do I do?

Paul Sutherland: We love our kids and want to “show” we love them, so we give gifts. Like us, our children are bombarded by commercial messages, advertisements, and TV shows proclaiming that more stuff is good, and bigger/newer/cooler stuff is even better. I see this even in the spiritual world of retreats, yoga, and meditation, where we are led to believe that a 40-day meditation/cleanse retreat is somehow better or more spiritual than a daily practice of kind acts, a loving attitude, mindful eating, some sitting, and if we're lucky, a

bit of prayer and yoga. But bigger, more, and longer is not better. Buying stuff for your kids out of obligation—where you feel sick about it—is, as they say in recovery, the first step: knowing you have a problem.

Thankfully, you obviously love your kids, want what is best for them, and want them to grow to be reasonably well adjusted, happy, and kind citizens. Foundationally, we know that you can't buy love, that you don't need to buy stuff to express your love, and that stuff is not what brings happiness. We also know in our hearts that buying stuff for the wrong reasons breeds grasping and clinging, and thus we might create our worst fear: that our sweet little babies grow up to be self-absorbed, greedy adults. That said, probably every parent feels a bit manipulated by the societal messages created around Christmas. So, how do we not spoil Christmas?

I have five kids, 24 years of parenting, and plenty of trial and error that have given me some ideas that have worked at least once in a while. I also think about this money/love/time stuff for a living. So I know it is not easy. But Thich Nhat Hahn says two things that have made Christmas, birthdays, and anniversaries much more enjoyable for me. First, he says, “The most important thing you can give the ones you love is your time.” Second, he says to ask the ones you love, “How can I love you better?”

When it comes to choosing presents, put those two statements together. I know from experience that 25 presents under the tree does not make your kids any happier than three thoughtful gifts, and it is good learning to have your kids prioritize the list down from 25 to three. That process requires both time and asking.

It also requires honest negotiation. In our house, Santa and parents don't give video games, guns, and violent toys. I can hear my wife, Amy's, voice in my head saying to our (now) seven-year-old, “No

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Star Wars death planet guns,” and mindfully listening to the “Well, my friend got one, and I won’t use it to [pretend to] kill.” In stores I will hear the “I want” from other parent’s kids, and I cringe when I hear Mom say, “I don’t have any money,” or “We can’t afford that!” Both statements, while they usually get the child to stop asking, seem totally untrue when the ask is for a Matchbox car, or candy at the checkout. If the statements are not true then the teaching to the child is that lying is OK. “No,” is an OK answer—without explanation.

Mostly we try to deemphasize stuff with ritual time. When we lived on Maui we had homemade

cinnamon rolls and pineapple and would usually be at the beach by noon. In cold Michigan, we get outside to sled, see family, and do things together. Time together is what creates traditions and memories that reinforce the lesson that life is about love and relationships.

Another idea that works is this: When your kids ask what you want, say you would like them to tell you a story, draw you a picture, write you a poem or letter, create something, go for a walk, or watch a special movie together. From my older kids I ask for a letter telling me how I could be a better dad and love them better.

Finally, I suggest celebrating everything. I consider myself more Buddhist or Taoist

than Christian, but we go to a Congregationalist church, our kids will be in the Christmas play at church, and they will take part in all the Christmas activities at their Catholic School. Healthy loving, rituals, celebrations, events, and traditions are important to a child’s growth. Creating traditions through celebration and fellowship binds us together and anchors our children in ways that allow them to create a strong sense of both “I Am” and “We are.” Having your kids identify themselves as part of a family that holds relationships as more important than stuff can come from the reawakening of what is important to you as expressed in your question. Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays! **S&H**

To ask Paul a question, email him directly at paul@spiritualityhealth.com.

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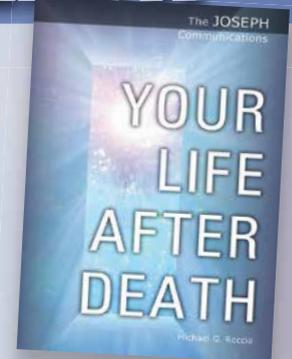
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